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ABSTRACT

In order to learn to write, physically disabled children often require special seating systems that align their bodies and improve their muscle tone. The writing paper must be placed in an appropriate position and must be stabilized. The writing tools should be as interesting as possible to keep the child's attention focused on writing, and can include brightly colored markers, crayons, paintbrushes, soap paints, etc. Writing devices are available that have been specially designed to assist children in grasping and writing, such as triangular writing pencils, pencil grips, pencil holders, weighted pens, universal cuffs, headsticks, mouthsticks, etc. This pamphlet describes several commercially available products and provides manufacturers' names and addresses; instructions are also offered for making useful writing aids. Several pre-writing games are presented to encourage children to develop writing skills as they play. (JDD)

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Writing Techniques and Adaptations

for Home and Classroom

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Marsha Dunn Klein, M.Ed., O.T.R.
Illustrations by Nora Voutas

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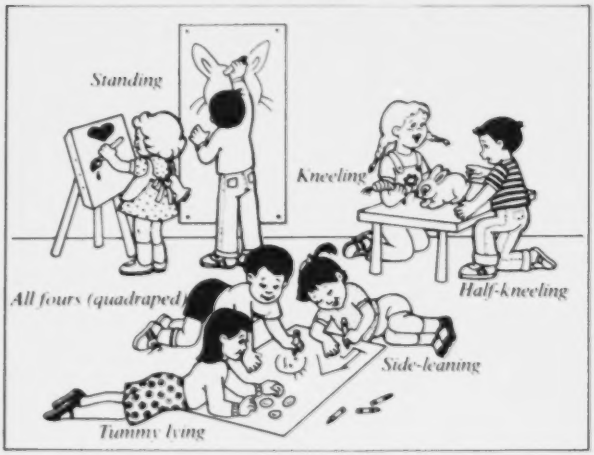
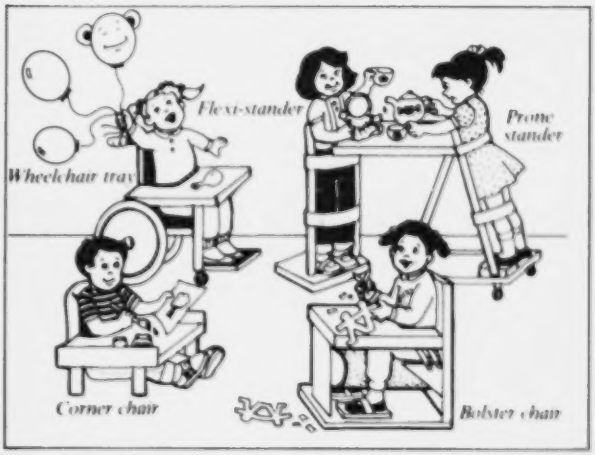
Writing Techniques and Adaptations
for Home and Classroom

Children deserve the best possible opportunity to learn to write. Three things are necessary for this. They need to be in a comfortable, stable position, seated in an appropriate chair, with their writing paper or writing activity placed in the position that is best for the individual child.

Physically disabled children often need special seating systems that align their bodies and improve their muscle tone. They can be seated in a more stable position by adapting the wheelchair or by using simple position changes. Consult your therapist for recommendations on positions and seating systems that would be best for your child.

Some Positions





In all positions, look at the child's body alignment. Ask yourself:

Is my child seated in a steady, stable position?
Is my child sitting up as straight as possible?
Is my child leaning to one side?
Are my child's feet touching the floor?

It's amazing how different the quality of writing can be when a child is securely seated. See for yourself! Sit on a chair, lean to the side, and dangle your feet so they don't touch the floor. Try to write a letter in this awkward position. It's no surprise that your writing will be affected. Simple things—like choosing a chair that fits the child, putting a cushion at one or both sides of the child, or putting a box under the child's feet—can make a big difference!

Placement of the Writing Paper

The proper placement of the writing paper depends not only on the child's physical need for stability, but also on the child's vision.

Is the child nearsighted or farsighted? Does the child see best peripherally or in one particular visual quadrant? If so, place the paper where it is easiest to see—directly in front of the child, at the side, on a slant, or closer to or farther from the child. Watch for any clues the child may send, such as pushing the paper away because vision is better when the paper is farther away, or turning the head to one side when the paper is centered.

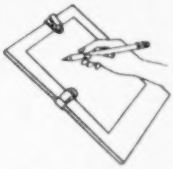
Generally, the writing paper should be close enough so the child's arm is comfortably bent at the elbow.

Stabilizing the Writing Paper

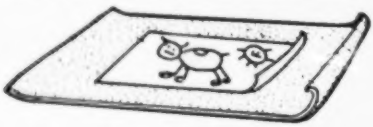
If lack of coordination, tremors, or other physical disabilities keep your child from holding the writing paper in place, tape it down with masking tape.

A number of stabilizing materials and techniques can be made or purchased. The distributors listed below are by no means the only companies that sell these products. The addresses of these and other distributors are listed on page 13, for your convenience.

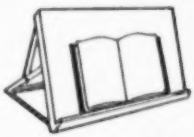
Standard clipboard—This standard clipboard is useful for general writing when the child needs help stabilizing one or both hands. It is available at department stores.



One-handed writing board—Lever-operated clamps hold the paper on the board. Rubber feet keep the board from moving. The board is available for right- or left-handed students. It can be ordered from Fred Sammons, Inc.



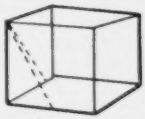
Dycem®—Dycem® is a nonskid material. Although it is hard to write on directly, it is excellent for holding a clipboard in place. It is available from Fred Sammons, Inc.



Tilted desk—This slanted work surface can rest on a table or wheelchair tray. It is sold through Fred Sammons, Inc.

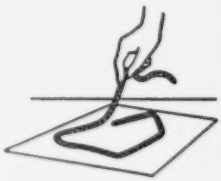
Overhead book holder/easel—This easel has an adjustable knob that locks support arms in position to hold up to 30 pounds. Elastic straps hold books, magazines, or note pads. The unit is available through Fred Sammons, Inc.

Shoulder stabilizing form—Some children need help to keep their shoulders and arms forward. Make a simple stabilizing form by cutting diagonal corners on a cardboard box. Fasten the cardboard on the child's wheelchair with electrical tape. For sturdier shoulder assistance, cut the form from Masonite, or attach scoliosis pads to the wheelchair tray. See the Rifton catalog for elbow blocks that can be attached to Rifton wheelchair trays.

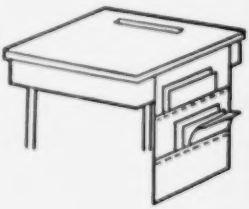


Contained work area—Cut a cardboard box as shown. Use electrical tape to attach it to the floor or on a desk top. Make it from wood if a more sturdy work area is needed. The sides can be cut higher for distractible students. It is especially useful for children who knock papers and pencils off the desk regularly.

Boundaries—Boundaries, made of yarn, rope, or sandpaper, surround the writing area. They are used by children who need extra help starting, stopping, and staying between the lines.



Homework organizers—Cardboard, fabric, or oaktag organizers can be attached to the preferred side of the desk. They are useful for students who have difficulty organizing materials or who knock papers off the desk frequently.



Writing Tools

Make sure the writing tools you use are as interesting, exciting, or alerting as possible! You want to keep the children's attention focused on the activity of writing—not have their minds wander. Here are some ways to use the five senses to increase interest!

Vision—

Use brightly colored markers, chalk, crayons, pencils, and paints.

Use writing tools with colors that contrast with the color of the paper. Sometimes it is helpful to contrast the paper with the color of the desk or table top.

Provide variety by using regular paper, butcher paper, aluminum foil, wax paper, construction paper, lined and unlined paper.

Hearing—

Attach bells to the pencil.

Tap the work surface to draw attention back to the writing activity.

Touch—

Vary the working tools. Use large or small paintbrushes, or let the children use sticks or their fingers in sand.

Paint or draw on sandpaper or a placemat.

Have the child make large designs with commercially available finger paints.

Make soap paints from Ivory Snowflakes whipped with water and food coloring. Let the child paint the sides of the bathtub with soap paints. Then, shower child and tub!

Finger paint with lotions, cornstarch, or powder spread on the table.

Smell—

Felt-tipped markers and stamp pads now come in a variety of scents.

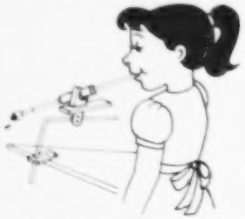
Taste—

Let your child finger paint with a favorite pudding or whipped cream.

Using a Headstick or Mouthstick

Learning to use a headstick, like any new device, takes a willingness to try—and to keep trying—the new way of doing something. Children must have at least moderate control of the head, neck, and shoulders to be successful with the headstick. Without this control, they may fall forward on the point. This causes the headstick to lose its proper fit and slide back on the head. For extra help, position the writing activity at the child's midrange by raising the work surface or using an easel.

Some children have better success using a mouthstick. Before trying this device, the child must be able to breathe easily through the nose while keeping the mouth closed.



Here are some headstick and mouthstick activities that are fun!

Tape a spoon to the pointer of the stick, and have the child dig colored sand out of a bowl or cup.

Use this same idea to have the child push dirt over large seeds that you have put in place in a planting tray.

Attach different pressure switches to electronic toys. The child can activate the toys by pressing the switch with the stick. Two distributors that sell pressure switches are J. A. Preston Company, and Prentke Romich Company.

Attach a magnet to the end of the stick. Have the child pick up objects such as small metal cars. Glue small magnets on some favorite toys, and let the child "hand you" the toys.

Attach a paintbrush to the pointer. Be sure the paint is in a sturdy cup that won't tip over. Using a white candle, draw a picture on a piece of white paper. Then attach the paper to an easel. As the child paints the paper, the "secret picture" will appear.

Stack blocks, and let your child knock them down with the stick.

Let the child use the stick to push beanbags off the wheelchair tray.

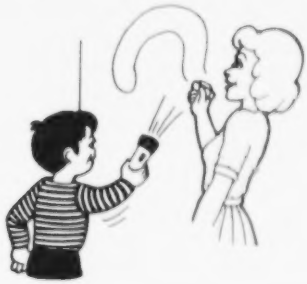
Later, if the child becomes skilled at using the stick, you can attach a crayon or pencil to the pointer and encourage the child to mark worksheets. Headsticks and mouthsticks also can be used with electric typewriters and computer keyboards. (You will want to attach appropriate keyboard guards first.)

A variety of headsticks and mouthsticks are available commercially. Two distributors are Fred Sammons, Inc., and Prentke Romich Company.

Pre-Writing Games

These activities encourage children to develop writing skills as they play.

Drawing with a flashlight—Tape a large piece of butcher paper to the wall. Let the child select a color. Cover a flashlight with plastic of that same color. Have the child "draw" with the light, using hands, head, foot, or other body part. Following the light patterns, draw the child's design on the paper. Use a crayon or felt-tipped marker that is the same color the child selected.



Magnet mazes—Developmental magnetic mazes increase the child's visual-motor control. The object is to move a "magnet man" through a maze board that is attached to a table with a C-clamp. Magnet mazes can be ordered through Lakeshore Curriculum Materials Company.

Bead tracks—Wire bead tracks help the child use different wrist movements and planning skills to move beads along a wire track. Lakeshore Curriculum Materials Company carries this toy.

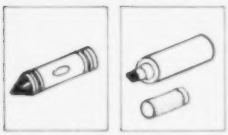
Rainbow writing—Draw a simple line design. Encourage the child to trace the design several times, each time using a different color of chalk.

Lotion motion—Most children enjoy drawing in lotion poured on top of an aluminum foil or wax paper surface that is taped to the table.

Questron rods and workbooks—Many children who have good wrist and hand control enjoy working with Questron rods and workbooks. When the child places the Questron rod on the correct place in the workbook, the toy makes a beeping sound and red and green lights turn on. Questron rods and workbooks are available in most toy stores.

Writing Devices

We have listed some of our favorite writing devices. The companies mentioned below are only a few of the many distributors that carry these items. We do not recommend one company over another. Addresses are listed on page 13.



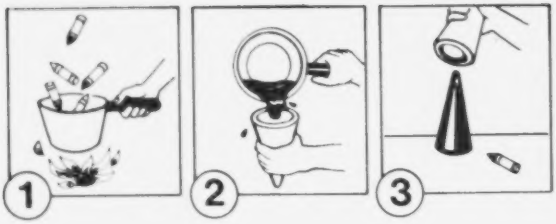
Felt-tipped markers and large crayons—Many times, little hands have an easier time holding larger writing tools. These items can be purchased at department stores, children's stores, or school supply stores.

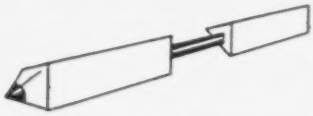
Chubbi Stumps—These short, wide crayons are made for little hands. They are available from Teaching Resources.

These *Easy-Grip Crayons* can be grasped with the hand over the ball or with a finger in the hole. Many specialty toy shops and school supply stores carry Easy-Grip Crayons; or you may order them from Lakeshore Curriculum Materials Company.

Large crayons—Children can use a full hand grasp on these crayons. To make them at home:

1. Melt crayons over very low heat or in the top of a double boiler.
2. Make a cylinder with wax paper or foil. Pour in the melted crayon.
3. Let the crayon harden. It can be shaved shorter to fit small hands.



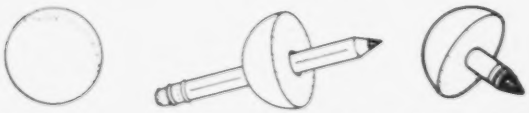


Triangular writing pencils and crayons—The triangular shape of these writing tools makes them easier for some students to grasp. They are made by Constructive Playthings.

Pencil grip—The triangular shape can be placed over standard or jumbo-sized pencils. Most office and school supply companies carry this type of pencil grip.

Stethro Pencil Grip™—This pencil grip is designed to fit the thumb and index and middle fingers. It is manufactured by the Rogers Company, and it is available in most office supply stores.

Bingo marker—The sponge at the end of this ink-filled bottle is used for marking Bingo spots. Its width and easy flow of ink make it helpful for immature writers. It is carried by school supply stores and shops that sell Bingo supplies.



Rubber ball pencil holder—Cut a rubber ball in half. Push a pencil or crayon part-way or all the way through the ball. Many students can make a whole-hand palm-down grasp with this adaptation.

Weighted pen—This writing aid is useful for students whose hands are slightly tremulous or uncoordinated. The pens are oversized for easy gripping. Weights are included which can increase the weight of the pen from 50 to as much as 120 grams. The pen uses standard ink refills. It may be ordered from Fred Sammons, Inc.

Built-up handle—A built-up handle can make an awkward narrow pencil, pen, or paintbrush more manageable. Order built-up handles from Help Yourself Aids, Medical Equipment Distributors, or Fred Sammons, Inc.

Cylindrical foam padding—Spongy foam padding is sold by the yard. Cut it to pencil-sized lengths and push the pencil through the opening. This padding is available through Help Yourself Aids, Medical Equipment Distributors, or Fred Sammons, Inc.

Adapted sponge—Using this adaptation, athetoid and ataxic children and others with a fisted hand can enjoy success at painting! Use these sponges on children's workbooks that have prepainted water-color pages. Attach the workbook page securely on the work surface, dampen the sponge with water, and let the child lay the sponge on the prepainted page. To make these sponges at home:

1. Dampen a sponge.
2. Sew a piece of webbing through the middle of the sponge.
3. Sew Velcro closures at each end of the webbing.

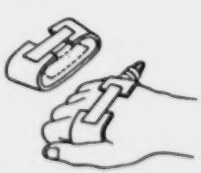
Adapted grasping—This technique helps children who use all their fingers when holding a pencil. Use a pencil gripper, and have the child hold a tiny rubber ball in the little and ring fingers when writing.

Adapted paintbrush—This is helpful for the child who has a tight hand and wrist drop. Wrap Orthoplast around the bottom half of the brush, or drill a small dowel through it so a tight hand can grasp it.

Adapted stamp set—Try this adaptation for children who can't hold a stamp block with their fingers. Drill a hole in the stamp handle. Insert a small dowel into the hole. Glue the dowel in place.

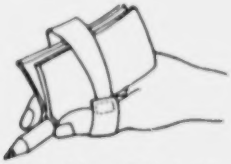
Shaving brush—Men's stores often carry old-fashioned shaving brushes. These wide brushes can offer the success that a small brush cannot.

Elastic holder—A simple pony-tail elastic can be used to hold a crayon in a child's hand.



Universal cuff—This elastic cuff has a pouch on the palm side, for holding a crayon. The crayon can be directed to the thumb or little finger side of the hand, depending on how the cuff is placed on the hand. The cuff is sold by Help Yourself Aids, Medical Equipment Distributors, or Fred Sammons, Inc.

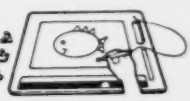
Sarong pencil holder—This wrap-around holder keeps a crayon in place in the student's hand. It is available from Help Yourself Aids.



Wrap-around pen and fork holder—This holder stabilizes the pen in a proper writing position. It can be ordered from Help Yourself Aids.

Klik pencil holder—With this device, the pencil is attached to the hand in a writing position. It is sold by Help Yourself Aids and Fred Sammons, Inc.

Sidewinder pencil holder—This pencil holder keeps the pencil in proper writing alignment in the hand. The thumb section can be moved if a different pencil direction or finger direction is needed. It is available from Help Yourself Aids.



My Good Friend Drawing Board®—This toy encourages the child to scribble and explore writing. The board uses magnets to draw lead-like materials up to the surface. The child can make many shapes by pressing a tool lightly on the board. The tools can be adapted by wrapping foam around the magnet pencil or using a triangular pencil grip. Small tools can be glued into drawer knobs, making them easier to hold. This toy is sold by Lakeshore Curriculum Materials Company.

List of Distributors

Constructive Playthings
2008 West 103rd Terrace
Leawood, KS 66206

Help Yourself Aids
P.O. Box 192
Hinsdale, IL 60126

Lakeshore Curriculum Materials Company
2695 E. Dominguez St.
P.O. Box 6261
Carson, CA 90749

Medical Equipment Distributors
2040 N. 16th St.
Phoenix, AZ 85006

Prentke Romich Company
1022 Heyl Road
Wooster, OH 44691

J. A. Preston Corp.
60 Paige Road
Clifton, NJ 07012

Rifton Equipment for the Handicapped
Route 213
Rifton, NY 12471

Rogers Company
P.O. Box 4327
Madison, WI 53711

Fred Sammons, Inc.
Box 32
Brookfield, IL 60513-0032

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